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**Drawing card: UW-Stout’s B.F.A. in illustration provides new pathway to visual storytelling**

**Degree, getting underway this fall, boosts School of Art and Design program offerings**

Written by **​Jerry Poling**, University of Wisconsin–Stout

Illustration has been a common thread uniting students in UW-Stout’s [School of Art and Design](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/colleges-schools/college-arts-human-sciences/school-art-design/sgx) for many years. Now, they can pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration, the first degree of its kind in the Universities of Wisconsin.

The program, approved last spring by the UW Board of Regents, got underway with the fall semester. Classes began Sept. 4. Enrollment is open.

“This had been on our wish list for a while,” said **Professor Dave Beck**, who was director of the School of Art and Design through the spring. “We wanted to develop it in a way that reflects our own sensibilities in SOAD and the university's polytechnic mission.”

Erik Evensen, professor in the department of design, is the program director. “Being able to express ideas visually is a standard expectation in the art and design professions. We welcome students with an interest in visual storytelling,” Evensen said.

“I want this program to be something I would have wanted to enroll in as a student. Most of the coursework was already there. We just needed to imagine how it would come together as a new program,” he added.

Emulating industry practice and emerging trends, the program will include coursework from the departments of visual and performing arts, and design, which make up the School of Art and Design.

Illustration builds skills in drawing, painting, printmaking, comics and other areas of art and design. Graduates can expect to find work in industries such as advertising, publishing, entertainment and as self-employed artists and consultants.

Before entering academia, Evensen was a graphic designer and illustrator in New England. He has also worked in the comics industry, on the “Ghostbusters” and “Back to the Future” properties from IDW Publishing, as well as his own independent graphic novels.

**Alum, professors excited about program**

For years, UW-Stout alumni have found themselves practicing illustration as a career without having a degree in the discipline. They include:

* [**Eliza Wheeler**](https://wheelerstudio.com/), 2006 graduate, children’s book illustrator and Sendak Fellow
* [**Chris Grun**](https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/news-center/four-alumni-dreamworks-animation-help-bring-laughter-and-joy-millions), 1995 graduate, art director at DreamWorks Animation
* **Mitch Gerads**, 2005 graduate, Eisner Award-winning illustrator for Marvel and DC Comics

They entered the industry after pursuing a different major at UW-Stout and had to learn some of their illustration skills on their own.

“I’m absolutely thrilled to hear that Professor Evensen has pulled together a new program plan and that students will be able to develop skills that are unique to the fields of illustration,” Wheeler said. “The UW-Stout art program continues to be an educational gem.”

Sam Kalda, a UW-Stout lecturer who has an M.F.A. in illustration from Fashion Institute of Design and who has worked with the New York Times, New Yorker magazine, Disney Digital, Barnes & Noble and more, said illustrators are “multihyphenate creators — artists, storytellers and visual communicators.

“As such, the education of an illustrator is interdisciplinary, blending studio art practices and design processes. The faculty and programs within Stout’s School of Art and Design are well-positioned to offer that breadth of knowledge,” Kalda said.

Students will be able to build portfolios with an emphasis on traditional areas such as advertising and publishing, as well as concept art for the entertainment industry. UW-Stout's existing coursework in comics will be available.

“The B.F.A in illustration will give students a path to study, create and comprehend the vastness of visual communication,” said **Mary Climes, assistant professor of studio art**, who teaches the comics curriculum. “It’s our job to expose our students to traditions of image-making like printmaking, comics, graphic design and digital drawing as well as prepare them for the future of illustration.”

The B.F.A. in illustration builds on the [School of Art and Design’s](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/colleges-schools/college-arts-human-sciences/school-art-design/sgx) six other B.F.A. programs. The school is the largest in the Upper Midwest, serving more than 1,300 students. The program array extends to Graduate Studies with a [Master of Fine Arts in design](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/mfa-design), which Evensen also directs.

**Four other new programs**

In addition to the illustration program, UW-Stout is debuting four other programs this fall: Bachelor of Science degrees in [biology](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-biology), [chemistry](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-chemistry) and [physics](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-physics), and a [Master of Professional Studies in design, entrepreneurship and sustainability](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/mps-design-entrepreneurship-sustainability).

“I am proud of UW-Stout faculty and staff that are working hard to continue to adapt and expand UW-Stout’s polytechnic offerings to meet student needs and the needs of the workforce,” said Glendalí Rodríguez, provost and vice chancellor for Academic Affairs.

UW-Stout graduates are in demand. A [new report](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/career-services/career-outcomes) found that 99% of UW-Stout 2022-23 graduates were employed soon after earning their degree and had a record average starting salary of $58,000, the best among higher education institutions in west-central Wisconsin.

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